

UN Chief Restores Faith in Kosovo Mission

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Soren Jessen-Petersen's dynamism and engagement with the community have revolutionised once-sceptical attitudes towards the UN-led authority.

Shortly before embarking on his visit to Belgrade, Soren Jessen-Petersen, head of United Nations Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, met local Albanian leaders early this week to assure he had openly ruled out the partition of Kosovo as an option.

The meeting on January 10 served as another reminder that Jessen-Petersen intends to engage more substantially with local leaders than his predecessors. By doing so, he has also improved the reputation of the UNMIK administration, increasingly seen as out-of-touch and incompetent.

Jessen-Petersen is the sixth UN Special Representative of the Secretary General, SRSG, as the chief of the UN mission that has administered Kosovo since the end of the 1999 NATO bombing is known.

Appointed in June 2004, he followed in the footsteps of Harri Holkeri of Finland who quit his post after a bout of ethnic rioting shook Kosovo last March.

When the new Danish chief took over the job, relations between UN and Kosovo's Albanian majority were at rock bottom.

The breakdown in the once cordial ties between locals and international personnel had been evident in the March turmoil, when rioters attacked UN property and burned UN vehicles just opposite the organisation's headquarters in Pristina.

Representatives of the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government, PISG, Kosovo's emerging elected government, blamed the UN for this climate of hostility, saying the UN had been too slow to hand power to locals and had botched the privatisation process.

Six months later, some of the causes of this friction have been removed. Kosovo institutions have gained more control over economic decision-making, the UN has signed a long-awaited law on conducting a census and - perhaps most importantly - the Serbian government has been told its plan to divide Kosovo into several units is not on the cards.

Details concerning the transfer of economic powers to local bodies were hammered out at a meeting between Jessen-Petersen and Kosovo's new prime minister, Ramush Haradinaj, on December 22 in Pristina.

There, it was resolved that the Economic and Fiscal Council, Kosovo's main body overseeing financial matters, previously chaired by the SRSG, will be chaired now by Kosovo's premier.

Hua Jiang, chief of UNMIK's public information division, told IWPR last week that this transfer of powers over the economy was not the end of the process. Kosovo institutions would gain additional powers over justice and police early this year, she said.

“Petersen has clearly established a new drive [for UNMIK] with very clear directions,” Jiang added.

Jessen-Petersen confirmed this trend himself, telling the press after the Pristina meeting that he approved of a “process in which local institutions are taking on more powers and we are moving to an advisory and supporting role”.

Many locals view this and other statements as indications that the UN chief intends to match fine words with action more than his predecessors did.

When Jessen-Petersen came to office, he pledged to execute the recommendations of the Eide report, named after Kai Eide, the Norwegian diplomat tasked by the UN secretary general, Kofi Annan, with reviewing the role of the UN mission after the March riots.

Eide suggested, among other things, a wide-ranging re-structuring of UNMIK and the transfer of more competences to locally elected officials.

Relations between locals and international bodies have also improved following the departure of Nikolaus Lambsdorff, of Germany, as head of the EU department responsible for overseeing privatisation.

The Kosovo government headed by outgoing prime minister Bajram Rexhepi spent much of 2004 in verbal bickering with Lambsdorff, blaming him for slowing the privatisation of Kosovo’s socially owned enterprises, SOE.

Muhamet Sadiku, an economic advisor to Haradinaj, said, “Lambsdorff became a synonym of the obstacles in the way of the privatisation process. The climate created by Petersen is taking us in a new direction, with a far more sustainable partnership between us and the international administration.”

Mechthilde Henneke, spokesperson for the EU’s department dealing with privatisation, said Lambsdorff’s departure had nothing to do with the chorus of complaints about him in Pristina. “The only reason Lambsdorff is leaving is that the German foreign ministry has called him back,” said Henneke.

But advisors to the Kosovo government say there was more to it than this. “Lambsdorff was left with nobody to work with – Petersen didn’t need an administrator totally rejected by the [Kosovo] government and he probably put a pressure on him to leave,” an advisor close to the outgoing Rexhepi government told IWPR.

Jessen-Petersen has scored most points with Kosovo Albanians by bluntly rejecting Belgrade’s much-touted plan for the decentralisation of Kosovo, which Albanians see as a thinly veiled plan for partition.

But he has also criticised Serbia’s premier, Vojislav Kostunica, over the latter’s successful call for Kosovo Serbs to boycott the recent Kosovo elections.

Baton Haxhiu, a local Kosovan analyst, said, “Unlike other administrators, Petersen is being very clear to Belgrade and Kosovo Serbs that the process of ‘standards’ will go ahead with or without them.”

The international community has set the fulfilment of a range of standards as the main precondition for the

start of talks on Kosovo's final status, due to begin in mid-2005 if the policy is seen as a success.

While Jessen-Petersen's firm hand has garnered most praise among Kosovo Albanians, some local Serbs also give him a cautious thumbs-up.

Oliver Ivanovic, a local leader in the Serb-run northern half of Mitrovica, said, "Petersen seems like an experienced and wise man and has dealt with maturity do far."

Ivanovic was one of the few Serb leaders to support Serb participation in the Kosovo election.

But Ivanovic ended his evaluation of the SRSG on a different note, adding that Jessen-Petersen would "probably be influenced by the Albanians in the end".

These words reflect the sentiments of many Kosovo Serbs, who view anyone seen as accelerating Kosovo's journey towards final status with dismay and suspicion.

While a deterioration in relations with Serbia is almost taken for granted, given the current thrust of Jessen-Petersen's mission, analysts warn that his honeymoon period with the Kosovo Albanians may not last for ever.

There are particular concerns attached to the possible departure of Haradinaj to the Hague if, as many suspect, the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia, ICTY, publishes an indictment of the premier for alleged crimes against Kosovo Serbs.

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